



## Issues, Assets, & Opportunities

### Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan



#### ISSUES

Issues are defined here as those aspects of Muskegon's Downtown that are viewed by various interest groups in a negative light. They are also perceived as problematic if not addressed and resolved.

An overview of the most important issues identified by participants in the process of preparing the Downtown/Lakeshore Redevelopment Plan follows:

##### Where/What is Downtown Muskegon?

Downtown Muskegon was identified by different people in different ways. Because of its location along the waterfront, Downtown Muskegon has historically developed in a linear orientation. Its land mass is substantial. Key facilities and activity centers such as Muskegon Mall, Frauenthal Center, waterfront, City Hall, Hackley Library, Muskegon Art Museum, and the Muskegon County Building, etc., are dispersed.

Perceptions of the diversity of Downtown facilities and activity centers is clouded by the Downtown's physical scale, the distance between facilities and centers, and by the absence of clearly defined pedestrian and vehicular routes and linkages.

One-on-one interview and Downtown shopper and telephone survey results indicated that the distance between Downtown facilities and activity centers is unreasonable.

##### Disjointed Nature of Activity

Downtown Muskegon exhibits little sense of place. From a physical and economic perspective, most uses do not relate to other nearby uses.

People unfamiliar with the Downtown have difficulty finding their way between the Muskegon Mall and Hackley Library, or between the Art Museum and Heritage Landing.

##### Lack of Focus for Activity

The Downtown exhibits no strong focus or concentration of activity. In many Downtowns, point of entry and a Downtown core are clearly defined by concentrations of buildings, government facilities, and other clusters of activity.

The dispersal of investment in the Downtown, and the absence of a Downtown plan and plan implementation program, have contributed to the current lack of focus.

##### Past Attempts and Support

A great deal of public and private money has been invested in the Downtown and waterfront. Private sector investment has often been unsuccessful, and public sector investment has often been criticized. Thus, much of the boldness, aggressiveness, and risk-taking inherent in a successful Downtown building process has diminished or been lost.

##### Long-Term Viability of Muskegon Mall

While retailing is alive and well in downtowns throughout the United States, traditional downtown retailing has been



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challenged, and is often no longer successful. Today, most successful downtown retail activity is associated with unique offerings and product mixes, intermingled with entertainment and visitor based attractions or activities.

While the mall serves a viable function to a sufficiently large population, and experiences reasonable sales volumes, the prognosis for its long-term viability in its current form, market position, and tenant mix may be less than positive. Future increased competition from various sources will likely diminish its economic health.

#### Timing for Expansion of Muskegon Mall

Proposals to expand the mall to accommodate one or more traditional anchor tenants and additional stores have been made over a number of years. While past proposals may well have been a viable option, they may no longer represent the best alternative for expansion of retail or retail-related activity to Downtown Muskegon.

Recent and proposed expansion of retail activity elsewhere in the Muskegon area, and significant retail growth of similar activity along the Alpine Avenue corridor (near and north of the M-37/I-96 interchange) in Kent County may decrease the viability of expanding the mall, and minimize the prospect of attracting tenants.

#### Previous Waterfront Investment

Over the years, private commercial investments have been made in the downtown and along the waterfront. These investments were substantial, though often

not in close proximity to other entities. Many of these investments proved not to be prudent to the initial investing parties.

The lack of return on and success of investments, or financial failure of individual ventures, has diminished the market for new commercial investment along the waterfront.

Much of the public and private investment along the waterfront appears to be visually isolated from the downtown core area. Linkages between the waterfront and the downtown are not readily apparent.

Waterfront residential development has met with much greater success. Examples include Harbour Towne and Cole's residential condominium projects. Both projects represent high-end residential development.

#### Industrial History and the Environment

Much of the Downtown and Lakeshore are perceived as tainted remnants of Muskegon's industrial history. Although the Downtown borders one of the regions largest inland lakes, its history and the current "brownfield" nature of many properties present a perceptual hurdle to appreciating this natural asset.

In combination with the other issues discussed here, this perception can block individuals from seeking out activities in the Downtown.

This perception can also block private sector investment in the Downtown. Environmental liabilities present a perceived hurdle to some investors and



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businesses.

#### Image in Larger Region

Success of the recent county-wide millage to enhance the Walker Arena, Frauenthal Theater, and immediate surroundings within the downtown, and the success of activities like the Muskegon Summer Celebration, and Parties-in-the-Park, indicate a public awareness of the importance of some of the downtown's activities and facilities to the regional population.

The downtown and City as a whole continue to suffer an image problem. From an economic perspective, many people in surrounding areas view Muskegon as they perceived the community to have been in the 1950s and earlier. While the City's economic base has changed, members of the public and investment communities are not fully aware of the transformation; and visitor activity, business opportunities, and investment have suffered.

#### Private/Public Sector Communications

There are perceptions that "one hand is not aware of what the other hand is doing." Communications between the public and private sector, and within the private sector, seem to be inconsistent to non-existent. Partnerships between the public and private sector seem to be weak to non-existent.

#### Private Sector Influence

Many communities have a group of private sector interests and individuals that have the ability to influence private and public sector decisions. Interviews with

individuals who are known entrepreneurs in City and regional business communities suggest that such a group no longer exists, or is no longer willing to exercise its influence.

Such a group can play a significant role in increasing and channeling investment in a productive manner.

#### Business Recruitment Activity

Success in a competitive environment calls for an aggressive approach to recruitment of business and investment.

Current regional recruitment activity, to the extent that it exists, is appropriately geared toward attracting new business and investment on a regional basis. While this is positive, there does not appear to be any significant organized attempt at recruiting activity targeted toward either the City of Muskegon proper or the downtown in particular.

#### Perceptions of Crime

Contrary to Police Department statistics, many people perceive sections of the downtown to be unsafe, particularly during the evening hours. These perceptions stem primarily from loitering youth and other activities that make individuals feel at risk in the downtown.

#### Visual Character and Maintenance

The downtown's visual character contributes to a lack of sense of place, disjointed activity, fear of crime, and other issues. Physical improvements and enhancements that have been made in one



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area do not appear to blend or be consistent with improvements in another area.

The downtown exhibits limited vibrancy due to a lack of contrasting colors. Many prominent buildings are fully earth tone or gray in color. There are few colorful flower beds, banners, flags, sculptures, and other features that soften the built environment.

Some of the downtown's most visible spaces present a poor image due to limited or non-maintenance. Examples include the Western Avenue streetscape (torn and missing banners, weed infested terraces, damaged pavers) and mall entries (broken sidewalk and pavers, non-paved public parking area, weeds, litter).

#### Shoreline Drive

Shoreline Drive was frequently referred to by the public and City staff during interviews and surveys as the "downtown bypass." Construction of the initial phases have increased the awareness and view of the waterfront, but did not dramatically increase access to the downtown. It can be argued that Shoreline Drive has created a significant barrier to movement between the traditional core area and the waterfront in Muskegon.

#### Vehicular Circulation

Visitors have difficulty finding their way between downtown facilities and activity centers.

Streets and circulation routes throughout much of the downtown are disjointed and confusing.

One-way streets, streets bisected by buildings, limited direction signage, the decentralized nature of development, limited public parking at activity centers, and similar factors contribute to unpleasant experiences for visitors unfamiliar with the downtown.

#### Western Avenue Historic District

Over the years, a variety of plans have been proposed for revitalizing Western Avenue. Approximately eight years ago, a streetscape program was instituted starting at the Third Street/Western Avenue intersection and extending several blocks south. Since that time, a few buildings and sites have been rehabilitated, including the recently renovated Union Depot that houses the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Western Avenue remains largely undeveloped, exhibiting a variety of vacant and underutilized buildings and sites. The streetscape has not been well maintained. This results in mixed impressions of Western Avenue.

Many feel the Avenue has great potential for future development of an historic nature. Others believe the Avenue has lost its historic potential, and express a desire to see most of the buildings removed, opening the way for new opportunities.

#### County and Metro Planning and Development

Although a County Metropolitan Planning Commission and Regional Planning Commission have existed for some time, Muskegon County lacks a comprehensive land use/development plan.





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Planning and development initiatives tend to be accomplished in isolation, with little regard for cross jurisdictional impacts.

County Metropolitan planning is generally not accomplished within the framework of goals and policies that recognize the need to cooperatively participate on matters of local and regional development. Past attempts by the staff of individual units of government to cooperatively tackle regional planning issues have met with only limited success.

The area's three largest cities (Norton Shores, Muskegon Heights, and Muskegon) share common borders and common issues. Each has a recognized downtown center or area and each employs full-time planning staff. Unfortunately, there is no established forum for sharing information, discussion of common needs and concerns, or for reviewing pending projects of metro/regional significance.

## ASSETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Assets and opportunities are those aspects of Muskegon's downtown that are perceived as positive, or are viewed by various interest groups as important and vital to the City's present and future.

An overview of assets and opportunities follows:

### Improved Access - Shoreline Drive

Rather than being viewed as a bypass that hinders access to downtown, Shoreline Drive can enhance ingress and egress to the heart of the community and nearby waterfront. Opportunities exist with respect

to enhancing the completed and uncompleted portions of Shoreline Drive so that the roadway provides for the smooth flow of activity in and out of downtown.

### History and Image

Along with Muskegon's image as a union town comes a proud history and work ethic that is, if properly marketed and promoted, important to future economic development efforts. Stressing the historic importance of Muskegon as a blue-collar working community with a quality-oriented, hard working, and dependable labor force can be a viable marketing concept.

Historically the waterfront has been used primarily for industrial purposes. Utilization of this history can be an asset. Residential activity, mixed with a working industry, is in vogue in many waterfront communities, creating an urban ambiance not otherwise achievable.

The City's industrial entrepreneurs brought with them a desire to expand cultural opportunities. At least 17 theaters existed between 1867 and 1955 along Western Avenue between Third and Pine. Most of these were in buildings that were incorporated into Muskegon Mall. The potential to revive some of that history along Western Avenue may still exist.

### Muskegon Lake Waterfront

Throughout the Country, there is no greater asset to quality development than a viable waterfront. Muskegon's waterfront represents probably the largest concentration of underutilized, developable land along Michigan's coastline. Creative





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use of the Muskegon Lake waterfront is an option unavailable to many other mature urban centers.

The City and County have instituted a variety of shoreline redevelopment measures to support and/or compliment future activity. A large State of Michigan grant was obtained by the City to assess the environmental condition of lakefront properties, and several industrial properties have already been razed (e.g., the Teledyne industrial complex) or replaced with land uses that reflect the tremendous asset of Muskegon Lake and provide public access (e.g., Heritage Landing). The City continues to aggressively pursue lakeshore redevelopment and the wise use of its brownfields. These activities position the lakeshore for excellent development and enhancement activities.

The waterfront also represents an opportunity to maintain or enhance wildlife habitat and public access to the shoreline. Such factors can provide additional reasons for people to experience the downtown.

#### **Grand Valley State University Research Vessel**

One waterfront project that has reached fruition is the siting of a GVSU research vessel along the waterfront in the heart of the community. This can be catalytic to focusing both related and unrelated development nearby.

Related development opportunities include a Great Lakes Aquarium, educational facilities and programs with a marine orientation, nearby placement of the U.S.S. Silversides, fishing sites, pedestrian

boardwalks, piers, and other waterfront facilities.

The above opportunities offer synergistic benefits to nearby retailers and services resulting from visitors attracted to waterfront development.

#### **U.S.S. Silversides Submarine and Maritime Museum**

Considered the nation's most famous surviving World War II submarine, the U.S.S. Silversides draws over 30,000 visitors annually. The submarine is currently berthed along the Muskegon Lake Channel, a significant distance from the downtown. Berthing the submarine at a downtown waterfront location would compliment the other marine facilities proposed for the downtown, and could add to the downtown visitor base.

#### **Waterfront Housing**

Waterfront housing projects have fared better from an investment perspective than waterfront commercial projects. Waterfront housing represents an additional opportunity to create a 24-hour commercial center of town, when coupled with marinas and other amenities.

#### **Visitor Base**

The number of visitors to Muskegon County, and influx of visitor dollars, continues to grow on an annual basis. While other parts of Muskegon County have captured an increasing number of those dollars, Muskegon and the downtown have largely been passed up as a destination. The waterfront and other



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assets, if properly developed and marketed, can reverse this pattern, creating a new flow of revenues and employment opportunities.

Activities including charter boat and on-shore fishing, daytime and evening cruises, gambling, weekend visitor packages (offering theater, fishing, and golf), and other lake related/marine activities have the potential to significantly enhance the downtown's tourism base.

#### **Availability of Developable Land**

The availability of land in the current commercial core and waterfront area is a significant opportunity. With targeting of public and private resources, phased development, and proper marketing, the land, much like the water, provides Muskegon with the opportunity to plan for and define its own destiny.

#### **Existing Institutions**

Downtown Muskegon is blessed with a diversity of facilities, activity centers, and institutions that continue to serve the entire region. Examples include the Frauenthal Theater, Walker Arena, Hackley Library, Muskegon County Museum, and Muskegon County Museum of Art.

Some of the area's largest corporate interests maintain offices or hold significant investment in the downtown.

Muskegon is the county seat, and houses the central offices for both the City and County governments. It continues to offer regional retail activity, and contains some of the areas best known restaurants.

Muskegon County's Heritage Landing was developed as a multi-use waterfront park that is used to stage events and other outdoor activities. Heritage Landing has met with success and positive public feedback.

#### **Farmer's Market**

While the Farmer's Market is not located in the core downtown, it attracts people on a regular basis during its operating season. Patrons of the Market then have the opportunity to come further Downtown and experience its assets. Opportunities exist to enhance spin-off, synergism, or the sharing of patronage associated with the Farmer's Market.

#### **In-Town Historic Districts and Structures**

Several residential historic districts (including a National Register District) are located within walking distance of the downtown. A portion of Western Avenue, an historic district comprised of commercial development, is part of the downtown and home to such notable facilities as the Amazon Building and recently renovated Depot. These districts help bolster the energy of the downtown via their population base and visitor draw. New development and preservation opportunities exist with the districts, which could further enhance the visitor base.

